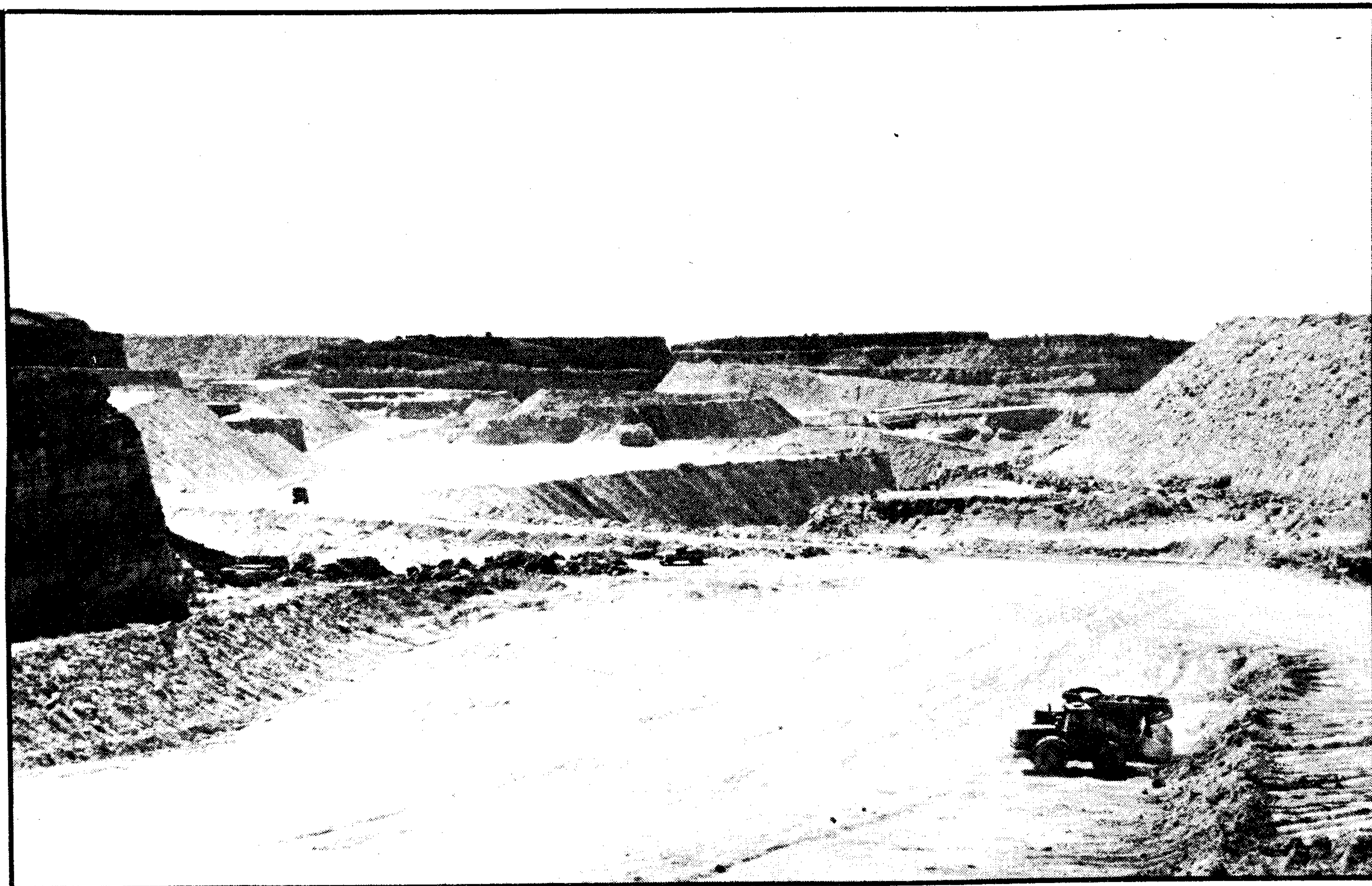


The Anaconda Jackpile Mine at Laguna Pueblo / George Johnson Photo

Sweet Ambrosia

By George Johnson

Standing at the center of the dust bowl New Mexicans call Ambrosia Lake, all we can see for 360 degrees around us is flat dry land and distant mesas rippling from the heat.

Except for steely blue mirages, the hole the area is named for hasn't held much water since a man called Ambrosio— the name has since been feminized— was found there floating face down, his body shot full of arrows.

Ernie Orrell, chief geologist for Kerr-McGee Nuclear, yanks his yellow Caterpillar cap down over his eyebrows and aims his company bullhorn angling at the earth, like you'd do with a loaded rifle. He's gazing south toward the ditch he jokingly refers to as "our selenium-polluted river." And he's waiting— just waiting— for one of the goddamned environmentalists on this one hundred man tour to ask him about defoliating the pristine environment for uranium exploration wells.

Then his Oklahoma voice will crack like electronic thunder: "I use 1000 tons of grass seed a year replantin' this desert." He's worked for Kerr-McGee so long he usually refers to it in the first person. "Four different types of native grasses." Two of which, from the looks of the area, must be sagebrush and tumbleweed.

A New Mexico state senator who's been rattling around on buses since 9 a.m., says, "Hell, Ernie, I haven't seen any grass since we left the hotel this morning." Ernie gives a laugh, amplified about twenty times, and says:

"Kerr-McGee can't be held responsible for what God gave up on after the sixth day."

But on the fourth day or the fifth, He gave this land uranium— more than any other place on the continent. And with nuclear power plants decorating drawing boards from Maine to California, U308 is skyrocketing from $8 a pound to $15, $25. . . and in a few isolated cases contracts are being negotiated at $40. Grants, a town of 12,000 that's billed itself for years as the Uranium Capital of the world, has been christened by *U.S. News and World Report* as one of the energy boom towns of the United States, with a population expected to quadruple by 1985.

The next day, these congressmen standing in a desert by grey hills of uranium ore will gather together at the Grants Elks Lodge to discuss the social, environmental and economic impact on the towns and villages of Ambrosia's shores. Mayors will ask for money for expanded sewers and schools while energy corporation executives show graphs and curves that rise shooting off the pages, plotting the points of a Chamber of Commerce dream.

But to some— the citizens given five minutes each at the end of the meeting to speak now or forever hold their peace— it's all more of a nightmare, of 19th Century Spanish villages choked with trailers and an Indian pueblo turned into an Anaconda corporation company town.

"It's scary," a resident of the village of San Mateo told me. "I came here for the silence, but now federal officials are running around with gamma counters and attaching dosimeters to my walls. We feel like guinea pigs in some radiological experiment."

The splitting of the atoms in 132 pounds of uranium released enough energy to vaporize the center of Hiroshima. The people of Grants and the villages that surround it are sitting on over half the U.S. reserves, more than 500,000 tons.

THE ANGLOS

To locate this nuclear stockpile, run your finger along Interstate 40 west from Albuquerque. The names you encounter sound like words on a Spanish reading list. *Canoncito, Mesita, Cubero, San Fidel. . .* until you hit that big black dot called Grants. *Seyboyeta* is a misspelling of *Cebolleta*, 'onion.'

From the sky the land looks as flat as your highway map, but if you zoom in close you can see the buttes and canyons, and a sprawling black flow of lava which, according to Navajo legend, is the dried blood of a dead monster. The blood flowed from a crack in the side of the 11,000-foot Mountain of Holy Turquoise, renamed Mt. Taylor, for General Zachary Taylor, who marched from beyond it in 1946, taking land from the Mexicans who took it from the Spanish (who called it San Mateo Mountain) who took it from the Indians four hundred years ago.

Today, a four-lane highway parallels the Spanish explorer Coronado's route, the one he followed in 1540 in his futile search for seven cities made of gold.

"It's funny," the Grants Chamber of Commerce people will tell you, "that all that time the 'gold' was just a few miles from him."

But in 1540 uranium was worthless. It was still worthless in 1882, when, right at the western reach of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, Grants was formed as a workers' camp, an island of Anglos in a semi-arid desert full of squabbling Navajos, Pueblo Indians and Spanish land-grant heirs. Over the years the camp became a town and the residents settled down to quiet lives of raising carrots, logging the Zuni mountains and mining the pumice Proctor and Gamble used to make Lava soap. When Route 66 came in alongside the railroad tracks, they sold gasoline and waterbags to tourists who succumbed to the billboards with their skull-and-crossbone warnings: "LAST CHANCE FOR WATER— DESERT AHEAD."

But then came WWII and the Manhattan Project; and just about the time the last big lumber mill was moving to Arizona and the pumice mine was winding down, the first nuclear bomb exploded two hundred miles south in Alamogordo. The shock waves rippled windows in Grants.

But no one who awoke that morning to nuclear thunder could have guessed what would happen just five years later when a Navajo sheepherder named Paddy Martinez picked up a bright yellow hunk of rock by Haystack Mountain and brought it into C.G. Gunderson's hardware store.

I got my dose of uranium belt history in C.G.'s son Bud's pine-panelled office, in the back of the original Gunderson building, erected around 1900 but redecorated so it looks as modern as the Pizza Hut across the street. Gunderson operates a string of filling stations, and on the wall of his office hangs a Navajo rug, handwoven with Standard Oil's red-white-and-blue chevrons.

"Dad asked Paddy how he knew that rock was uranium," Bud Gunderson told me, "and the Indian said he'd met a prospector once at the Grants bus depot.

"He told Paddy that if he ever found a yellow rock to tell the government and he might get a $10,000 reward," Gunderson smiled and shook his head.

"Dad liked Paddy so he thought he'd humor him. Since he found the rock on railroad land he boxed it up and mailed it to a friend who was a division superintendent for Santa Fe in Los Angeles.

"Dad knew Paddy had a lot of imagination. Those sheepherders had lots of time to sit on their mesas and gaze at the moon."

QUICK REACTION

But in three or four days, C.G. Gunderson got a call from L.A., and the next thing he knew Tom Evans, the chief mining engineer for the railroad, stepped off a traincar at the Grants station and asked to see Paddy Martinez right away. Paddy took him out to Haystack and what Evans saw so impressed him that he moved the company's main mining offices to the nearby village of Prewitt and oversaw the development of the area's first uranium mine.

Evans brought in Anaconda to mill the ore into talcum power yellowcake, but it wasn't long before Jack Knaebel, manager of the mill, thought Anaconda should have a piece of the action. He paid Woodrow House and Evelyn Keithly to fly low over the land in airplanes, watching the dials of their scintillometers for radioactive spikes. That's how they found the Jackpile, on Laguna Indian land, the largest open uranium pit in the world.

By that time, Bud Gunderson said, people were buying geiger counters at Gunderson hardware like radios and TV sets. One man, Louie Lothmann, took his out to Ambrosia and dropped the probe down an abandoned wildcat oil well.

"We used to go out to those wells and drop rocks down them to hear the water splash," Gunderson told me.

But what Louie Lothmann heard was the typewriter-like clicks of gamma rays. He drilled fifty-two holes, and in all but one he came up with ore. By the mid '50s corporations like Kerr-McGee, Homestake and Phillips 66 were sinking shafts, and Grants filled so full of trailers that coming down the rise into town it looked like a lake of steel.

Today, the name Ambrosia is to uranium what Kimberly is to diamonds. More than a dozen shafts rise from the basin, and combined with the rock blasted from Jackpile, produce as much as three million tons of uranium ore a year, feeding mills which slake off all but 6000 tons as waste rock tailings, stacked into piles, some marked with "DANGER: RADIATION" signs.

"There are jobs now for anyone willing to work," Gunderson told me. "Unless they'd rather live on food stamps." The town boasts a Kerr-McGee Park, a Uranium Cafe (Chinese-Mexican) and the daily newspaper runs the symbol for the atom on its masthead, managing on some days to fill page one with as many as four nuclear energy stories. Nearby Milan has a weekly laboriously titled *Uranium Empire Reporter*.

But Gunderson is the first to admit that not all the stories are positive. Last summer one concerned a warning that, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency, the drinking water at several of the mines and two of the subdivisions might be contaminated with selenium and radium. They raised the problems of those exposed tailings piles, five times as radioactive as the milled yellowcake.

Since then the Grants mineral belt has become the environmental hotspot of the state, with the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Agency joining with EPA in monitoring air and water, and studying the problems of massive deforestation caused by exploration in the national forests on Mt. Taylor.

"But I think the environmentalists get a little emotional," Gunderson says. And according to Jean Fisher of the Chamber of Commerce, nobody is worrying much about the water and air.

"They're interested in the jobs and the money," she says.

JARRED AWAKE

Unless there is a nuclear moratorium, the work and the dollars will be there. Gulf Corporation is drilling what will be the world's deepest uranium mine next to the sleepy town of San Mateo, jarred suddenly awake by dynamite blasts, and all the companies— Kerr-McGee, United Nuclear, Anaconda, Sohio— are expanding their operations, processing rock that a year ago was considered low grade waste.

"With these new prices, ore that once was judged worthless can be mined and sold," Russell Benedict, a prospector and journalist, told me.

"If I can find enough accessible ore that contains just .05 of one per cent of U308 I can make money. If I find a hill of .1 ore I could be a millionaire."

Santa Fe railroad put Paddy Martinez on its payroll as a $250-a-month mining scout and gave him a railroad pension. Neither he nor the Santa Fe ever collected that $10,000 reward, but the Chamber of Commerce made Paddy a lifetime member. They offered him a plaque but he asked for the money instead.

"He kept on running his cattle and sheep," Gunderson said, glancing over his shoulder at a photograph of Paddy dressed in his Sunday best: blue jeans, turquoise and khaki. "But with the threat of starvation lifted he had more time. He liked to sit on the foothills and watch those drilling rigs."

When Russell Benedict isn't hunting up investors or checking his claims at the Johnny M. Mine, you might find him strolling among the tailings piles at Ambrosia, with a scintillation counter gripped in his hand. With his windworn face and untrimmed moustache, Benedict looks like a prospector, but this time he's searching for the alternative newspaper he and his daughter work for.

"I straddle the fence on this uranium issue," Benedict will tell you. At the same time he's drafting an ad for the *New York Times* to rustle up money to stake mining claims, he's working on an article on the possible hazards of radioactive carcinogens. Next month's he's planning a hike along the railroad tracks that run through Grants, the ones that rattle with ore cars headed for the Bluewater mill. He's curious as to what kind of gamma count he might find.

The tracks come in from the east and run across the frozen bubbles of those lava flows where, before uranium was king, treasure hunters sought for the loot from the Grants train robbery of 1897, or for the golden mission bells supposedly hidden among the cracks and caves by the Zuni Indians when they joined the Pueblo revolt in 1680.

But twelve years later the Spanish reconquered the area and Indians from the Rio Grande Valley are thought to have moved west to escape harassment, founding Laguna Pueblo, home of Anaconda's Jackpile Mine. Its manmade canyons sprawl across the northern edge of the reservation, and whenever the wind blows, a cloud of dark grey dust rises over its villages and hovers like a thunderhead.

Sometimes a grain of the dust will find its way into an EPA radiation counter. The feds kicked off their search last summer after preliminary tests showed unacceptably high selenium and radium counts in the mine's drinking water supply. There were indications of uranium and selenium leaching into the Rio Paguate, one of the tribe's two streams which flow through Anaconda's mesas of radioactive ore.

It sounds like the same old story: the multinational corporation killing off the Indian's land. But, as Jean Fisher of the Grants Chamber of Commerce says: "Don't worry too much about the poor Indians. You should be talking about the rich Indians instead."

RAKING IN MONEY

While the Navajos struggle with badly negotiated royalty contracts for coal, the Lagunas are raking in money. Over eighty percent of Laguna men work for Anaconda at miners' wages, and the money paid to the tribe has gone for schools, clinics, scholarships and an alcoholic treatment center.

Laguna Pueblo's origin has never been determined with great accuracy by anthropologists. The neighboring Acomas say they don't know. . . "they're just a bunch of bastards," an Isleta quoted the Acomas as saying.

They speak the same language as the Acomas, *Keres*, and are thus related to the peoples of Santo Domingo, Cochiti, San Felipe, Santa Ana and Zia, all in Sandoval County across the Rio Puerco badlands which were infested with violent Navajos until the U.S. Army brought security.

It seems clear from the limited historical record and a few archeological digs permitted by the tribes that the modern Laguna occupies land once inhabited and tilled by the Acomas, who moved to their fortress city on Enchanted Mesa when it got too dangerous below.

Throughout modern historical times, the Lagunas and Acomas have been at each others' throats over boundary disputes, even though they are brothers within the same linguistic group. Since the Pueblos of New Mexico are unique among American Indians in that they do not inhabit reservations, but own their own lands in fee simple (beginning with Spanish land grants recognized by the U.S. under terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ended the war with Mexico), they fight each other in the courts just like other citizens, suffering dreadful consequences on occasion. Only recently did Congress pass an act declaring the pueblos to be under the same federal protection as reservation Indians. Squabbles with Spanish and Anglo squatters in the area also cost dearly. The Acomas never succeeded in getting back much of the land they claimed belonged to their fathers. As a result, they are not exactly overjoyed at the newfound wealth of their neighbors.

The Lagunas have invested their haul in stocks and bonds to provide the tribe with an income after the mid-1980s when the lode runs out and the tribe is suddenly unemployed. Lagunas are making sure they're left with something more than an enormous hole. Some people have jokingly suggested filling the pit with water and charging tourists to water ski.

The village of Paguate would be a marina then, a picturesque cluster of stone and adobe mud houses perched on the edge of a 2000-acre jewel. But now, in 1976, the ancient village looks like it's ready to slide into the crater, where diesel shovels take ten-ton bites from heaps of ore.

The shovels have already eaten through the original highway, and now when you drive north from the freeway exit you swerve onto a detour which climbs up and around the mine. According to one story, Anaconda wanted to relocate all of Paguate to follow an ore vein, but they settled for drilling underground tunnels instead.

Mrs. Ben Lorenzo, a Laguna who lives in Paguate, says that when Anaconda blasts it feels like someone's beneath her house, pushing up on the floor. She and her husband, Ben, a former governor of the pueblo, are the most outspoken of a handful of Indians who complain that the blasting is cracking apart the foundations of their houses and destroying their once-tranquil way of life.

"It seems like it just gets worse and worse," Mrs. Lorenzo told me when I visited her at the Lorenzo home on the high, far edge of the village. She pointed from the doorway of her stone house which, unlike most of the buildings of Paguate, has been plastered over and modernized like the Gunderson store.

IT WAS BEAUTIFUL

"You see that mesa? The real high one? Some of our people used to graze sheep up there." She closed her eyes, trying to recapture a memory. "We used to just sit and watch it— it was so beautiful!

"Now the whole thing's been ground up, crushed by Anaconda into whatever it is they crush it into." She paused. "Uranium ore."

"But come in, come in." She beckoned me into the kitchen and explained that her husband was gone for the day. "Look at those cracks in the wall." She hurried to the other side of the room. "Anaconda sent some men to plaster them, but they didn't do a very good job. And they won't believe it's from the blasting. Every time you complain they make you feel like a fool."

I sat down at the formica table, as Mrs. Lorenzo carefully reached for a black-and-white decorative pot, perched on a high shelf to protect it from children.

"We used to make such beautiful things here," she said, turning it over in her hands. "But after WWII and welfare came, the women lost interest. Then came the money from the mine. No one was willing to sit by the highway and sell things to tourists anymore.

"You see how white this is? Well, some of the women tried to revive the art. They got clay from the Jackpile pit. When they baked the pots, the white turned yellow. You know, maybe from uranium?"

She walked over to the wood box, grabbed a stick and pushed it into the stove. Then, looking over at the electric blender and the TV set, she laughed.

"I keep telling Ben I want a new stove, but he says food tastes bad cooked on anything but wood." She paused then and looked at his picture on top of the refrigerator.

"Ben has tried to do right by his people. But what can one man do against a whole company?" She turned to the window. "The mine seems to get closer and closer to the village every day."

By this time her grandchildren were coming in from school. I stood to leave and Mrs. Lorenzo followed me to the door.

"Did you know the sky used to be clear here? Now it's as bad as Albuquerque. You can even smell it on some days." She looked out at the void beyond me. "We had gardens and orchards. But now with that uranium dust everyone is scared to grow food. It might be radioactive, they say.

"Oh, Paguate used to be such a beautiful little village. I remember coming here from Laguna to visit my grandparents when I was a little girl. Where that pit is, there was a beautiful green valley with fruit trees all around. Apples and peaches. . . Now, all anyone thinks about is the uranium money."

As I drove back through the dirt streets of the village, I thought of a story she told me, a Laguna Indian joke: "They dig up *our* mesas, take *our* uranium, and carry it off on trains. But it's Grants that calls itself the uranium capitol of the world."

THE HISPANOS

As you drive into the flatlands north of Paguate, you're entering one of the most desolate spots of New Mexico— and this is a state that is full of them. Occupied for centuries by violent bands of Navajo warriors, the area was all but ignored by the Spanish conquerers until the late 1700s when a group of Franciscan priests built a mission in a futile attempt to Christianize the Indians. After the priests abandoned the area to the devil, a band of Spaniards from Chihuahua founded the town of Cebolleta, fighting off continual raids of Navajos who carried off their women and children for slaves. But the Spanish soon turned the tables. A town leader named Don Pedro Chavez began kidnaping Indians and selling them on the market for five hundred pesos apiece— until he was surprised by the raiders. His head was later found on a mountaintop near San Miguel.

It was a violent land, finally pacified by U.S. soldiers. Somewhere along the line an official who couldn't spell changed the name to Seboyeta, the way you see it now on maps and highway signs.

Now, with a hundred-unit trailer park on the drawing board, this isolated town is about to undergo a third upheaval, wrought not by armies but by mining companies like Sohio and United Nuclear. It's the beginning of a new era, but in a land that's been ruled under three flags (and under people who didn't even have a flag) eras change all the time.

In Seboyeta's sister village of Marquez, eighteen miles further up an unpaved road, Exxon is planning to explore between crumbling adobe houses, and Kerr-McGee is fighting it out with Bokum Resources over six hundred acres of uranium up the canyon from the old town.

Only four families still make fulltime homes in Marquez; three more live there part-time. The one-hundred-year-old village has been called a ghost town by the press, and when I drove there one Sunday in April there were pickup trucks parked at only two of the houses. I picked one at random where, it turned out, Vidal Molina was sitting by a four-burner wood stove, watching snow flurries out the window of his adobe house.

"You know," Mr. Molina told me, "before the war there were forty families here. We had two dance halls and a church. But Uncle Sam took all the young men away to fight, and when they came back they saw there was really no way to make a living. Everybody moved away.

"But now that they're finding uranium on the grant, people are showing up all the time, claiming to be land grant heirs. It's not fair. Forty-six of us have kept up the town and paid the taxes, while everyone else forgot about Marquez. Now more than a hundred want to share uranium money. We are fighting it out in lawsuits all the time."

Molina, who was born in the village, remembers when it took a week by wagon to travel the forty miles to Albuquerque. Now the state is talking about paving the road from Seboyeta, and maybe building a throughway straight to Albuquerque. As you look out at the mud and stone houses and old corrals, it's hard to imagine that the old town could be full of trailers someday, a boom town, or a company town for the mine that will be in Marquez Canyon.

MESSED UP

"They've really messed up the works up there," Molina said, nodding his head in the direction of Bokum and Kerr-McGee. "When the state bought the land for a game preserve from a man named Williams, they didn't get the mineral rights. So Williams leased them to Kerr-McGee, and Bokum got the rights to the rest of the canyon from the land-grant board.

"We're pretty worried since we get our drinking water from there. And Bokum is sinking a shaft right in the middle of the stream bed. Once in a while that water gets pretty dirty. We have health department people up here all the time.

"Now we go further up to get our water right from the spring. But we're worried about the cattle, especially if they put in a mine. You can't raise livestock on polluted water."

I followed Molina's directions to the canyon and saw how the roadgraders had leveled it into a grid of drill pads, used by the companies to sample the ore and delineate the shape of the deposit. According to news accounts the companies are drilling their holes closer and closer together— a good indication that the deposit is expected to be a profitable one. One hole can cost as much as $10,000 to $25,000.

As Vidal Molina says, it doesn't look much like a game preserve anymore. Exploration roads zig-zag up the canyon walls, widening here and there to accommodate drilling rigs, disappearing at the canyon's edge. But I'd seen the aerial photographs taken by the EPA, so I knew the roads continued for miles.

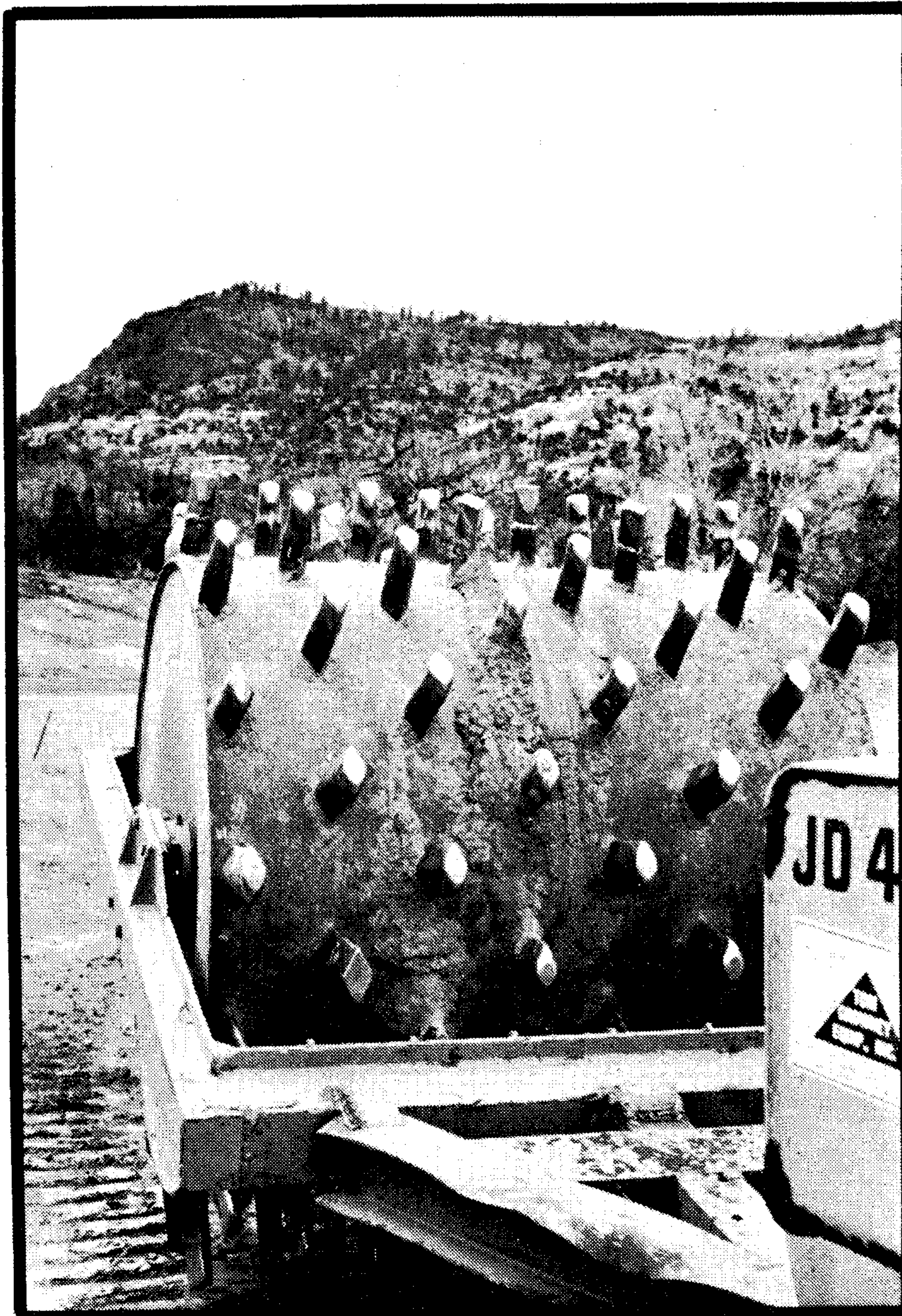
Kerr-McGee has promised to reseed the land they've deforested, but Bokum makes no guarantees. They're the people the environmentalists staged a showdown with at Water Canyon, an officially designated roadless area the company wants to enter with bulldozers and drilling rigs. You can see their marks all over Mt. Taylor.

But whether or not the canyon is reseeded will be largely an academic question after the mining begins.

Joe Pierce, chief of a special state task force investigating environmental problems in the uranium belt, foresees an operation beginning with 110 to 150 employees. Change buildings will have to be constructed for the miners, then water systems and septic tanks.

"Marquez is pretty much abandoned now," Pierce said. "It's a quiet little town, but someday there will be ore trucks booming through. The few old families hate what's happening to their canyon, but they know they just might get rich, too."

"We hope we get some money out of this," Molina told me. A lot of it depends on the outcome of that Kerr-McGee/Bokum boundary dispute. There's a fence, Molina explained, that marks the line between the town grant and the game refuge. On one side the uranium is Bokum's and the royalties go to Marquez. On the other side all the riches go to Kerr-McGee. But



Marquez Canyon, New Mexico / George Johnson Photo

Kerr-McGee claims the fence wasn't built right at the boundary and that Bokum is exploring on their land.

"After twenty-three years they want to move our goddamned fence and take our money," Molina said.

"Hell," he laughed. "It's been in court, now we have it on appeal. With all these lawsuits it seems like the attorneys get all the money anyway.

"Sometimes I wonder how it would be if they didn't find uranium in our canyon. At least it would have eliminated all this fighting. My people would be living in peace."

Then he smiled and thought about how Bokum is building right in the runoff of Marquez Canyon.

"One flash flood and it could all float away." He laughed and slapped his leg.

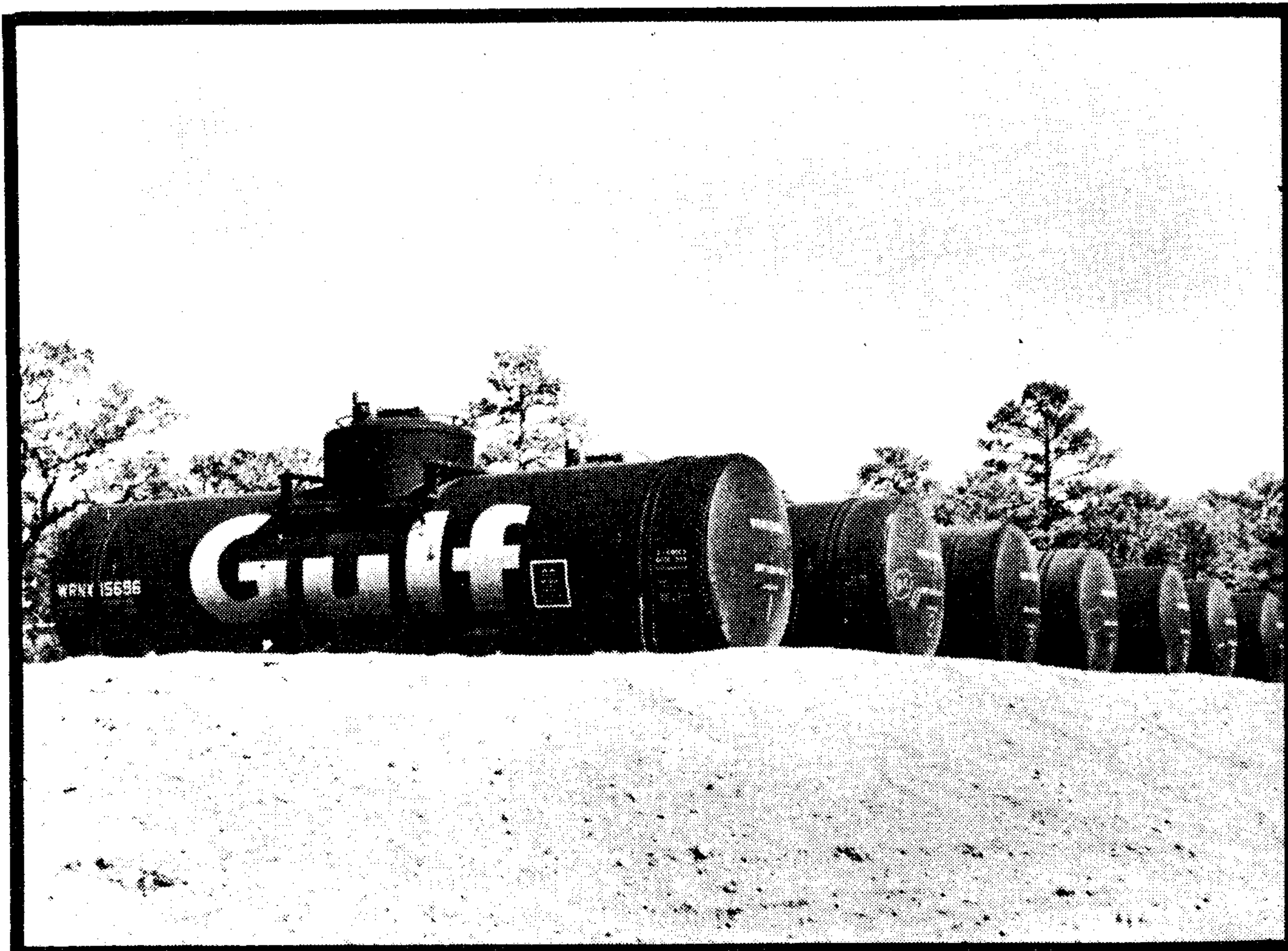
THE LAND

Theoretically you can drive from Marquez to the town of San Mateo where Gulf Mineral Resources has moved in next door. A few years back Ernie Orrell and a buddy tried it in their four-wheel drives. But they got lost, so I thought I'd backtrack down to I-40, return to Grants, and then drive north around Mt. Taylor. It was a clear day, with the ventilation pipes that hook from the floor of Ambrosia spewing hot air, which environmentalists fear is radioactive. Dust was blowing across the highway from United-Nuclear-Homestake Partner's mill so hard it seemed it might fill the blue bowl of sky.

In place of a welcome mat, San Mateo greets you with a big black-on-white sign: "DO YOU WANT TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEATH OF A CHILD? SLOW DOWN." Gulf placed it there to put a damper on its trucks which come barrelling through the village with so much thunder residents complain the vibrations are cracking their old houses.

Now company officials are working with the county to build a bypass. But even the town dissidents agree that, if they have to have a uranium mine for a next-door neighbor, they're glad it's Gulf Resources. When the corporation's shaft hit the 600-foot mark and the town's two wells went dry, Gulf helped get one going again— even though manager John Selters insists that it had nothing to do with his drilling operation. He said the San Mateo pump was just old— but residents wonder at the coincidence, especially when they see Gulf pumping fifty gallons of water a minute from the shaft. Some still complain that their water is now too cloudy and warm to drink. But if things don't get better, Selters says he might drill the town a new well.

North of San Mateo you enter Cibola National Forest, 'Land of Many Uses.' As you cross the cattle guard into the pinon-juniper forest, you see that one of the uses is uranium exploration. Signs rise between the trees marking territory staked out by Homestake, Gulf, Kerr-McGee. Visitors who think of national forests as protected species are shocked to see signs that say "Conoco— Owner," but under the 1872 mining law public lands are open for



Gulf in the foothills near Mt. Taylor / George Johnson Photo

Marquez, New Mexico / George Johnson Photo

mineral propecting even if it involves blading access roads and drilling holes. Of course, a company planning anything major must first file a Plan of Operations, and then pay up to $100,000 for an archeological study. But when you view the destruction of Mt. Taylor on an aerial slide you wonder what the plans are for.

I was driving away from Mt. Taylor now, toward San Mateo Mesa. When the road got bad I stopped and hiked to the top, then across the tableland of scrub pines and the ten-foot-deep trenches state law requires be scraped out when a mining claim is established.

From San Mateo Mesa you can gaze north and see nothing but open land surrounding an extinct volcano, so eroded that nothing remains but a thin lava plug supported on sloping shoulders, a landmark the Spanish call *Cabezon*, which roughly translated means 'big, ugly head.'

According to Navajo legend, it's the head of *Ye-itsa*, the same black beast whose dried lava blood flows beneath I-40 and whose bones (which geologists say are petrified trees) lie in piles as far east as Albuquerque.

Ye-itsa was killed by the Holy Twins, who made the world safe for humanity by slaying its monsters. But some of them were invincible, the legend goes. Greed and Hunger still stalk the land. They're not as easy to seek out and destroy as that old volcano.

If an environmentalist were to write a New Testament of Navajo mythology and zero in on Uranium Land, he might portray the monsters of Greed as steel spiders with names like Anaconda, Gulf and Kerr-McGee, who weave webs of electrical lines. But, the company executives would remind them, the lines go to feed the monsters of Hunger.

NOT A MONSTER

It's tempting to stereotype corporations and the people who run them. But Ernie Orrell, chief geologist for Kerr-McGee, is not a monster. As we sat in the back of the tour bus roaring down the highways, he pointed out cliffs and outcrops, telling me stories of ancient seas and Jurassic swamps, about the time he discovered a dinosaur bone. He brought us all to Poison Canyon where the Santa Fe Railroad dug one of its first mines after Paddy Martinez told Tom Evans about a place where a man couldn't keep sheep because they'd eat the grass and die. The canyon turned out to be full of purplish loco weed which makes you loco because it's full of selenium. And where there's selenium you'll often find uranium ore.

That's why Orrell wrinkles his nose and snorts when he says selenium, just like some environmentalists I know snort when they say Kerr-McGee. To him it's just one of nature's ninety-two elements which has been here since time began.

When Orrell is absorbed in his stories of Ambrosia and the geology around him, you can tell he loves the land as much as Vidal Molina of Marquez or Mrs. Lorenzo of Paguate. But to mining geologists, beauty comes from making use of resources. To them even a pit like Jackpile is beautiful because, as at Grand Canyon, you can gaze at the stratified layers and read the history of the earth.

* * *

It was quiet up on San Mateo Mesa. The winds below me poured through the canyons like flash floods or traffic, and sometimes I'd hear one of those bugs that sound like rattlesnakes. As far as I walked I found mining claims, and if Ernie Orrell hadn't explained that the ore deposits beneath me were thousands of feet deep, I would have worried that this table of land would someday be chomped up like Mrs. Lorenzo's mesa was over by Paguate, and carried off in twenty-five-ton trucks. But like the mines of Ambrosia, it will be underground, and all you can see of an underground mine are buildings, shafts. . . and slate grey piles of tailings emitting low-level radiation for thousands of years.

At those Elks Lodge hearings the state archeologist said there are 16,000 historical sites and Indian ruins scattered all over the Grants uranium belt. You stumble on them now and then when you're hiking through the desert, or up on Mt. Taylor: fallen walls of rock forming rooms littered with pottery shards.

"That's what will happen to *us* if we don't progress," one of the state representatives announced toward the end of the meeting. I followed him and his wife as they left the cinderblock building.

"To hell with the environmentalists," he said, looking over his shoulder to see if there were any reporters listening. "From now on I'm going with industry."